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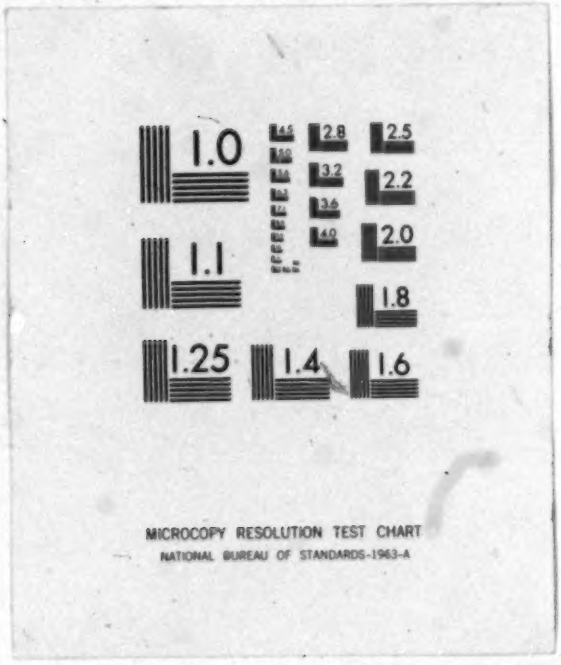
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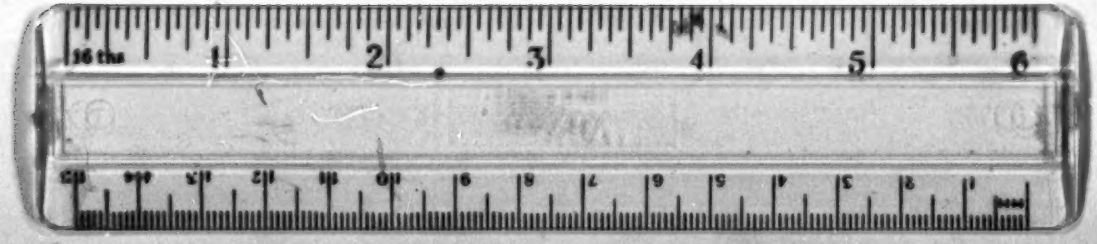

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THE COMPASSIONATE CAMERA:

1978

DUSTBOWL PICTURES

THE COMPASSIONATE CAMERA: DUSTBOWL PICTURES

A travelling exhibition arranged by the Circulation Department of the Victoria and Albert Museum

INTRODUCTION

The photographs in this exhibition are drawn from files assembled during the years 1935–41 by the Farm Security Administration, an agency within the U.S. Department of Agriculture. That the extraordinary artistic richness of these files has been widely recognized, and that a new generation has been exposed to the grim story they tell, has been largely due to a master among photographers, Edward Steichen. In 1962 Steichen mounted at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the exhibition *The Bitter Years*, entirely drawn from the FSA files which, over 20 years before, he had described as containing 'a series of the most remarkable human documents ever rendered in pictures'. The art of documentary photography is a notoriously difficult one. Simultaneously educational and evidential, its special approach relies on human responsiveness and a cultivated awareness of artistic means. Thus, sometimes, documentary photography seizes the essence of a predicament. More rarely, it may leave us also with an insight into the human condition that seems timeless and universal.

The list of photographers represented here includes some of the most distinguished names in modern photography: Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee, Carl Mydans, Marion Post Wolcott, Arthur Rothstein, Ben Shahn and John Vachon. The number of photographers who contributed to the creation of the FSA files has been stated as 30, although there were never more than six employed at any one time and sometimes the number was as low as two. The level of talent was unusually high and it is a pity that the work of more photographers could not be included.

We should like to record our gratitude to the Photoduplication Service of the Library of Congress for the meticulous care taken in making prints especially for this exhibition. Except in a small number of cases where delicate originals might have been placed at risk, the prints have been made from the original negatives held by the Library of Congress. We are also grateful to the Reference Section of the Prints and Photographs Division for the provision of caption information from the files. It may be pointed out here that although the total number of photographs in the FSA files has often been reported as 272,000, the total given by the Library of Congress is an estimated 75,000 prints and their corresponding negatives, with further exposures on some 35mm strips as yet unprinted. In times when one photographer may use 20 rolls of film during a big football game (for the number of exposures multiply by 36) our sense of the extensiveness of the FSA records may be altered. However, it may be asked whether a crucial period in the life of any other great nation has ever been so fully documented and whether any other government has succeeded so notably as a patron of still photography.

Work began on the files in July 1935 within an agency founded earlier in that year by executive order of President Roosevelt. This agency, the Resettlement Administration, was the especial creation of Rexford G. Tugwell, one of the original 'Brain Trust' of the New Deal. In 1937 the Resettlement Administration was renamed the Farm Security Administration. With the Tennessee Valley Authority and the Works Progress Administration, the RA/FSA was a pioneering agency which fulfilled Roosevelt's call, in the presidential campaign of 1931, for 'bold and persistent experimentation' in government. The FSA was responsible for the welfare of the farming community, of which a vast submerged segment had suffered increasing hardship during the previous 50 years. Despite outward prosperity, the general decline in American agriculture was already reaching crisis before the Depression. It was the result of disparate causes, including the expansion of the sharecropping system after the abolition of slavery, errors in land use and an unabated falling off in the value of agricultural produce as against manufactured goods. The situation was described by Erskine Caldwell in *Tobacco Road* (1932). The planners at the FSA tackled these vast problems with vision and boldness, producing schemes of considerable fiscal ingenuity to keep farmers on their land, distributing free grain, lending equipment, building new communities. The advent of power machinery, widespread foreclosures of land and, above all, the drought of 1932–36 which formed a giant Dustbowl from Texas to the Dakotas – all these had new and terrible results. This experience falls between *Tobacco Road* and another famous novel written seven years later, and it has been summarized by a distinguished historian of these years, Professor William E. Leuchtenburg:

> Tractored off their land, some of the 'Arkies', and even more of the 'Okies', whose farms had blown away in the dust storms, trekked westward to the orange groves and lettuce fields of the Pacific Coast. By the end of the decade, a million migrants, penniless nomads in endless caravans of overburdened jalopies bursting with tow-headed children, had overrun small towns in Oregon and Washington and pressed into the valleys of California. Their dust-covered Hudson sputtering westward along Highway 66, the Joads of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* symbolized thousands of Americans uprooted from their farms, turning to the lotus lands of the West only, when they came to the end of their weary odyssey, to be drowned in a sea of cheap labour, exploited by the great orchards, hounded by the sheriffs, their poverty a badge of shame.*

Even in the present small exhibition much of this story is told. Steinbeck's novel, itself often documentary in quality, led on to John Ford's film (1939) and the essential story appears again in the *Dust Bowl Ballads* recorded by Woody Guthrie in 1940. It will be recalled that one oasis of dignity and security for the Joads was a government camp for migrants in California. This was an FSA project. Such camps were advocated by the economist Paul Schuster Taylor, Field Director for the California State Emergency Relief Administration, Division of Rural Rehabilitation. Dr Taylor has stated that the success of his arguments probably depended a great deal on the photographs by Dorothea Lange which he presented with them. As man and wife, Taylor and Lange published their famous collaboration *An American Exodus*, 1939.

Tugwell invited a former associate from the economics faculty at Columbia University, Roy E. Stryker, to found a Historical Section at the FSA. Stryker started work in July 1935 and quickly appointed Arthur Rothstein, Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans and Ben Shahn to his staff. In his selection of photographers, Stryker showed his flair: he has often affirmed that they educated him visually. Conversely, he provided a great deal of back-up knowledge and insight for some of his team. Beyond that, Stryker scrutinized the work sent back from the field with exceptional concentration. As he turned over the photographs freshly printed by his laboratory staff he would ask: 'What is the photographer *saying*? What has he *done*? Why did he *shoot*?' The existence of a central file probably gave rise to creative interchange among the photographers, especially as two of them, Lange and Evans, were undeniably major talents at the height of their powers. No monograph has yet been published on the development of the FSA Historical Section, an aspect of the agency not treated by Sidney Baldwin in his otherwise very detailed account *Poverty and Politics: the rise and decline of the Farm Security Administration* (Chapel Hill, 1968). The encyclopaedic range of the files – and a definite encyclopaedic intention – were brought out in the exhibition *Just Before the War* (Balboa, California 1968), the catalogue of which contains the fullest published account of the photographic achievement to date.

The FSA enterprise was part of a wider documentary movement which had already inspired masterpieces by Dziga Vertov in Soviet Russia – the *Kino-Pravda* newsreels, the pioneering films of Robert Flaherty and the British contribution outstandingly associated with John Grierson. That the same spirit touched literature is shown very palpably in the *USA* trilogy of John Dos Passos, which also uses shifting viewpoints and interpolated 'Camera-Eye' and 'Newsreel' sections. In still photography there were certain precedents, well-known to Stryker and probably to all of his photographers. There was the organization of a group of photographers by Matthew Brady, whereby the Civil War had been recorded. Although good prints were not made from his plates until 1947, the images by which Jacob Riis had lain bare the conditions among immigrants to New York in the 1880s and 90s were well-known. After the turn of the century there was the work of Lewis W. Hine, from which we learn of child labour and poverty. Outside America there was the subtle achievement of Eugene Atget in Paris. More generally, the development of a sharply-focused, close-up style was spear-headed by American photographers in the 1920s; around one of them, Edward Weston, was established Group *f*.64 in 1932. An outstanding antecedent of the approach of Walker Evans is the *Blind Woman* of Paul Strand, 1916, which showed how a certain very subtle kind of irony could be evolved to communicate a complex subject without introducing mockery or diminishing pathos.

The FSA files were drawn upon extensively in their own time by poets, novelists, sociologists, film-makers, exhibition organizers, press and magazine editors. It is likely that they not only saved certain people from starvation – as a passage reprinted in this folder shows – but enabled programmes of emergency relief to be carried through on a much more ambitious scale, with the support of a larger proportion of the nation, than would otherwise have been the case.

Mark Haworth-Booth

*Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932–1940, Harper and Row, New York, Evanston and London 1963, pp 138–9

NOTE ON THE EXHIBITS

The prints are 16 x 20 in. size, the finish double-weight matte. Illustrations are to be found in the following, some images appearing in more than one publication, some also in publications not listed here.
Walker Evans, *American Photographs*, New York 1938; Archibald MacLeish, *Land of the Free – USA*, London 1938; Dorothea Lange and Paul Schuster Taylor, *An American Exodus: A record of human erosion*, New York 1939, New Haven and London 1969; Edward Steichen, 'The FSA photographers', *US Camera 1939 Annual*, pp 43–66, New York 1938; James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let us now praise famous men*, New York 1941; Richard Wright and Edwin Rosskam, *Twelve million black voices*, New York and London 1941; Roy E. Stryker, 'Documentary Photography', *The Complete Photographer*, No 21, 10 April 1942, pp 1364–74, New York 1942; ed. Samuel Chamberlain, *Fair is our land*, New York 1942; ed. Edward Steichen, *The Bitter Years*, New York 1962; Robert Doherty Jr, 'USA FSA', *Camera*, No 10, October 1962, pp 9–51, Lucerne 1962 (English Edition); ed. Thomas H. Garver, *Just Before the war*, Balboa, Calif. 1968; editors of Time-Life, *Photojournalism*, article 'The Passionate Camera, pp 116–34, New York 1971. See also bibliography. Slides of all the exhibits are available from the National Slide Loan Service, Victoria and Albert Museum.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Our warm thanks for their valued help to: Dr Alan M. Fern and Mr Robert M. Overmiller, The Library of Congress; Dr Paul Schuster Taylor, Professor Emeritus of Economics, University of California at Berkeley and Mrs Therese Heyman and Mr Charles Lokey, Oakland Museum, in respect of the work of Dorothea Lange and later uses of *Migrant Mother*; Mr Eugene M. Schaeffer and Mr Bernard Lang, US Information Service, London, for help in devising and financing a series of lectures on the exhibition, held at the Victoria and Albert Museum in February–March 1973; Mr Leo de Freitas and Mrs Gail Buckland, Royal Photographic Society; for information – Mr Peter Turner, Mr R. C. Reinders, Mr Peter Bower, Dr Mike Weaver, Mr D. H. Palmer and Mr Christopher Brookeman; photomural design, Mr Graham Poulton; for permission to reprint and play tapes of songs by Woody Guthrie – TRO-Essex Music Group, RCA Records Ltd, Phonographic Performance Ltd; for quotations from *Popular Photography*, Ziff-Davis, Inc., New York.

THE DOCUMENTARY APPROACH

In photography, as in the other arts, the documentary attitude is not a denial of the plastic elements which must remain essential criteria in any work. It merely gives these elements limitation and direction. Thus composition becomes emphasis, and line sharpness, focus, filtering, mood – all those components included in the dreamy vagueness 'quality' – are made to serve an end: to speak, as eloquently as possible, of the thing to be said in the language of pictures.[1]

Documentary, in fine, is an instrument of human observation and judgement within the strange unmastered period in which we live. No more, but also no less. If it becomes increasingly important, it is because the world today is a world so preoccupied with actualities and their mastery that it needs the aid of so unique a servant. In this direction, it may most powerfully observe, point its observation, and act as the hand maiden of education and of propaganda. The need to go into the unknown and pioneer mentally and esthetically in harsh new fields may frighten the weakling. There is no alternative.[2]

1 Roy E. Stryker, 'Documentary Photography', from *The Complete Photographer*, No 21, 10 April 1942, p 1368
2 John Grierson, 'The Documentary Idea', ibid., p 1380

The Great Dust Storm

On the fourteenth day of April of 1935
there struck the worst of dust storms
that ever filled the sky.
You could see the dust storm coming –
the cloud looked death-like black –
and through our mighty nation
it left a dreadful track.

From Oklahoma City
to the Arizona line
Dakota and Nebraska
to the lazy Rio Grande
it fell across our cities
like a curtain of black rolled down –
we thought it was our judgement
we thought it was our doom.

The radio reported –
we listened with alarm –
the wild and windy actions
of this great mysterious storm.
From Albuquerque and Clovis
and all New Mexico
they said it was the blackest
that ever they had saw.

From old Dodge City, Kansas,
the dust had rung their knell –
and a few more comrades sleeping
on top of old Boot Hill.
From Denver, Colorado,
they said it blew so strong,
they thought that they could hold out
but they didn't know how long.

Our relatives were huddled
into their oil-boom shacks
and the children they was crying
as it whistled through the cracks.
And the family it was crowded
into their little room –
they thought the world had ended
and they thought it was their doom.

The storm took place at sundown
it lasted through the night
when we looked out next morning
we saw a terrible sight.
We saw outside our window
where wheatfields they had grown
was now a rippling ocean
of dust the wind had blown.

It covered up our fences
it covered up our barns
it covered up our tractors
in this wild and dusty storm.
We loaded our jalopies
and piled our families in
we rattled down that highway
to never come back again.

Woody Guthrie
from the album *Dust Bowl Ballads*, New York 1940

VOICES OF THE PEOPLE AND THE TIMES

If I could get me a piece of land I'd go diggin' it with my hands / I come from Texas and don't owe or own a thin dime back there / That drought put the fixins to us / *Son to father* You didn't know the world was so wide *Father to son* No, but I knew what I was goin' to have for breakfast / Burned out, blowed out, eat out, tractored out / Yessir, we're starved, stalled and stranded / I wouldn't have relief no way it was fixed / What we do want is a chanst to make an honest living like what we was raised / When you gits down to your last bean your backbone and your navel shakes dice to see which gits it / This life is simplicity boiled down / I've wrote back that we're well and such as that, but I never wrote that we live in a tent / A human being has a right to stand like a tree has a right to stand

Words from the field recorded by Dorothea Lange and published in *An American Exodus*

I see one third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 2nd Inaugural Address, March 20, 1937

Roy, a man may have holes in his shoes, and you may see the holes when you take the picture, but maybe your sense of the human being will teach you there's a lot more in that man than the holes in his shoes, and you ought to try and get that idea across

Rexford G. Tugwell, recalled by Roy E. Stryker in *Just Before the War*

. . . the documentary photographer feels obliged to bring home more than a cold record. Somehow he has to incorporate into that rectangle which he has cut out from the surrounding and therefore formless reality, what the real thing sounded like, what it smelled like – and most important, what it felt like

Roy E. Stryker[1]

I was assigned by [Stryker] to go down to the deep South to do a story about cotton. He said casually to me as I was about to go, 'I assume you know something about cotton'. I said, no. 'Just a minute', he said. 'Put down your camera bag'. Then he turned to his secretary, 'Cancel Carl's reservations'. We talked all afternoon, then at dinner, and all night, and when I left the next morning, I knew something about cotton

Carl Mydans[2]

Lady, you're having a hard time, and a lot of people don't think you're having such a hard time. We want to show them that you're a human being, a nice human being, but you're having troubles.

Russell Lee, quoted by Roy E. Stryker in *Just Before the War*

1 Roy E. Stryker, 'Documentary Photography', *The Complete Photographer*, No.21, 10 April 1942, (New York), p 1365
2 Quoted by John Durniak, 'Focus on Stryker', *Popular Photography*, vol 51, No.3, September 1962, p 64

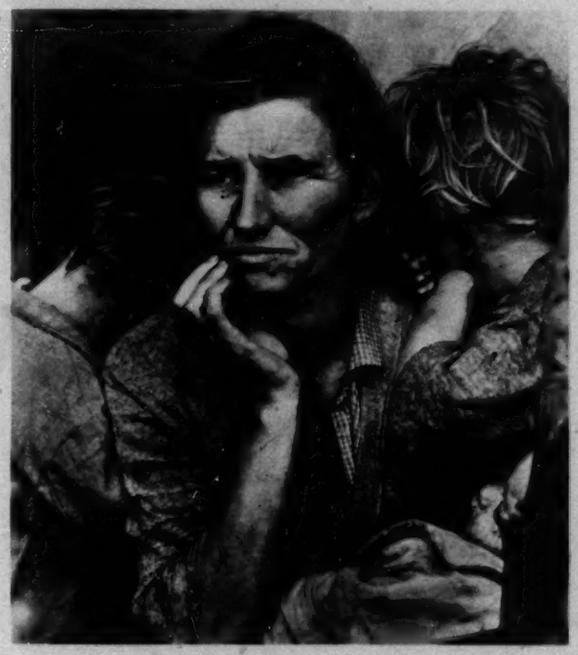
DOROTHEA LANGE DESCRIBES THE TAKING OF MIGRANT MOTHER

(The photographer was returning to her family after a month's assignment in the field. She had recorded many migrant labour camps in California during that time, the bitterly cold March of 1936. The cameras were packed in the back of the car, the rolls of exposed film boxed to send on to Washington. She had started the long drive home, reckoning on a seven hour drive cruising at 65 mph)

I was on my way and barely saw a crude sign with painted arrow which flashed by at the side of the road, saying PEA-PICKERS CAMP. But out of the corner of my eye I *did* see it.
I didn't want to stop, and didn't. I didn't want to remember that I'd seen it, so I drove on and ignored the summons. Then, accompanied by the rhythmic hum of the windshield wipers, arose an inner argument:
Dorothea, how about that camp back there?
What is the situation back there?
Are you going back?
Nobody could ask this of you, now could they?
To turn back certainly is not necessary. Haven't you plenty of negatives already on this subject? Isn't this just one more of the same? Besides if you take a camera out in this rain, you're asking for trouble, etc., etc., etc.

LIBRARY

Having well convinced myself for 20 miles that I could continue on, I did the opposite. Almost without realizing what I was doing, I made a U-turn on the empty highway. I went back those 20 miles and turned off the highway at that sign, PEA-PICKERS CAMP. I was following instinct, not reason; I drove into that wet and soggy camp and parked my car like a homing pigeon. I saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother, as if drawn by a magnet. I do not remember how I explained my presence or my camera to her, but I do remember she asked me no questions. I made five exposures, working closer and closer from the same direction. I did not ask her name or her history. She told me her age, that she was 32. She said that they had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields, and birds that the children killed. She had just sold the tyres from her car to buy food. There she sat in that lean-to tent with her children huddled around her, and seemed to know that my pictures might help her, and so she helped me. There was a sort of equality about it.



The pea crop at Nipomo had frozen and there was no work for anybody. But I did not approach the tents and shelters of other stranded pea-pickers. It was not necessary; I knew I had recorded the essence of my assignment . . . .
. . . Whenever I see this photograph reproduced, I give it a salute as to an old friend. I did not create it, but I was behind that big, old Graflex, using it as an instrument for recording something of importance. The woman in this picture has become a symbol to many people; until now it is her picture, not mine.
What I am trying to tell other photographers is that had I not been deeply involved in my undertaking on that field trip, I would not have *had* to turn back. What I am trying to say is that I believe this inner compulsion to be the vital ingredient in our work; that if our work is to carry force and meaning to our views, we must be willing to go 'all-out'.

from 'The assignment I'll never forget: Migrant Mother' by Dorothea Lange, *Popular Photography*, vol 46 No.2, February 1960, pp 42–3, 126

Dr Paul Schuster Taylor has now added this to the story of *Migrant Mother*:
Ragged, ill, emaciated by hunger, 2,500 men, women and children are rescued after weeks of suffering by the chance visit of a Government photographer – 'San Francisco News', March 10, 1936
The photographer had made her way to the *News* office with hardly-dry prints in hand. The editor lost no time notifying the United Press. The UP immediately contacted relief authorities, who sent a representative to the pea-pickers' camp at Nipomo to tell the faintly cheering pickers that food was on its way from Los Angeles.
from 'Migrant Mother: 1936', *American West*, Palo Alto, May 1970

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Records: Woody Guthrie, *Bound for Glory* – Transatlantic 2481; *Dust Bowl Ballads* – Transatlantic 2011; *Library of Congress Recordings* – EKL 271/2; *Poor Boy* – XTRA 1065; Jack Elliot, *Sings songs of Woody Guthrie* – EMI SL-10167; New Lost City Ramblers, *Songs from the Depression* – Transatlantic 5264; Pete Seeger, *Songs of Work and Freedom* – Washington Records 460; Almanac Singers, *Talking Union and other Union Songs* – Transatlantic 5235.

FILMS

The British Film Institute holds copies available for loan of:
Pare Lorentz, *The Plow that Broke the Plain* (1936, score by Virgil Thompson) and Robert Flaherty, *The Land* (1941). A copy of Lorentz, *The River* (1937) is available at the BFI for study. All three use stills from the FSA files.

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